

The New Gnostics and the Wisdom of Irenaeus

June 04, 2002 by Doug Groothuis

Christian apologist *par excellence*, G. K. Chesterton observed in 1930 that “We hear much about new religions; many of them based on the very latest novelties of Buddha and Pythagoras.” The perennial war of ideas develops few new weapons systems, but rather uses the same cognitive ammunition throughout the varied campaigns of intellectual history. Despite the dizzying diversity of religions, ideologies, and faiths simultaneously contending for our allegiance in pluralistic America, the basic world-view options are not unlimited. The intellectual combat between the New Age movement and orthodox Christianity boils down to several central points which were recognized by the early church eighteen hundred years before New Age celebrity evangelist Shirley MacLaine spoke to her first disembodied spirit.

A poster I saw at a retreat center read: “There are two important facts about the universe: 1. There is a God. 2. You are not he.” This is Christianity in a nutshell. The Creator God is not confused with his creation. Humans are not now, nor will they ever be, divine. God is a personal being (a He), not an impersonal principle, force, or essence (an It). A New Age version of this poster would read: “There are two important facts of the universe. 1. There is a God. 2. You are It.” Or, in the words of Joseph Campbell from the television series and book, *The Power of Myth*: “You are God, not in your ego, but in your deepest being, where you are at one with the nondual transcendent.”

Campbell, who died in 1987, was a contemporary prophet of the New Age. He frequently harks back to Gnosticism for spiritual inspiration, saying that we can live out of the sense of Christ in us as Jesus lived out the Christhood of his nature. He also directly quotes from Gnostic text *The Gospel of Thomas* to the effect that Jesus’ mission was to reveal the deity of all people. This is the heart of New Age spirituality: we are divine and we must rediscover this potential in order to better our world.

Neo-Gnostics, such as Campbell and many in the diverse New Age camp, imbibe at the well of gnosis, but not without straining out what offends modernity’s tastes. The harsh Gnostic dualism of dark matter versus pure Spirit is ignored or redefined in psychological terms. The

fantastic hierarchic cosmologies of innumerable spiritual beings is likewise winked at or interpreted, in good Jungian form, as manifestations of psychological processes. Yet the ancient appeal of Gnosticism remains: There is a hidden and secret wisdom (gnosis) that can be directly experienced by turning within. This is not found in traditional orthodoxy, which is merely exoteric or external, but in the deeper or esoteric meaning. The supreme realization of gnosis is the spark of divinity within. Underneath the illusions of ignorance burns the fire of the unlimited.

The exact origins of Gnosticism are a matter of great scholarly debate, but we find it thriving as an alternative to orthodox Christianity in the second century, and several New Testament writers such as John and Paul may have been responding to Gnostic or proto-Gnostic elements in their letter to the first century church. The greatest apologist against the Gnostics was the early church theologian Irenaeus, who wrote *Against Heresies* in approximately 180 A.D. From this work we can cull several principles for dealing with the neo-Gnostic or New Age teachings so widespread today.

First, Irenaeus went to great lengths properly to identify and explain the beliefs of the “Gnostics so-called,” those who supposedly knew reality. Reading through *Against Heresies* one discovers a careful analysis of the Gnostic system in its different forms. Until the discovery of many primary Gnostic texts near Nag Hamaddi, Egypt, in the 1940s, Irenaeus and other apologists provided nearly all of our knowledge of the Gnostics. Although some have disparaged the church fathers’ treatment, historian Patrick Henry observes in his book *New Directions in New Testament Study* that they have integrity and “it is still legitimate to use [their] materials to characterize Gnosticism.” Irenaeus, while opposing Gnosticism as a world-view antithetical to Christianity, labored to fairly present its views fairly.

No matter how ridiculous or blasphemous Christians find various New Age teachings, caricature is never an appropriate apologetic. Irenaeus, and all good apologists since, have tried to avoid the straw man fallacy. The Gnostics cleverly combined truth and error such that any critique of their doctrine demanded precision. As Irenaeus said,

Error, indeed, is never set forth in its naked deformity, lest, being thus exposed, it should at once be detected. But it is craftily decked out in an attractive dress, so as, by its outward form, to make it appear to the inexperienced . . . more true than truth itself. 1.1.1.

Second, Irenaeus discerned that Gnosticism was not a minor deviation from biblical revelation but an utterly alien world-view disguised as Christianity. Therefore, in responding to the heretics, he articulated a Christian response adequate to throw the Gnostic perspective into aberrational relief. He was not content to chronicle falsehood. He demonstrated biblical truth. As Harold O. J. Brown notes in his book *Heresies*: “The fact that *Against Heresies* is so comprehensive is due in no small measure to the fact that the heresy against which it speaks was not limited to a particular point or doctrine, but was an alternative vision of religious reality spanning a wide range of doctrines.”

Irenaeus should inspire us today to present “the full counsel of God” in response to New Age deviations. If New Age ideas of self-deification and unlimited human potential are infiltrating the world of psychology, let us mine the rich lode of psychological insights from the Scriptures to counter the counterfeit. The same holds true in every other area as well. Biblical alternatives must be discovered, developed and implemented. You can’t fight something with nothing.

Third, Irenaeus knew that biblical misinterpretation was a key weapon in the Gnostic arsenal. Gnostics defended any number of unbiblical doctrines by appealing to Scriptural texts out of context and with no respect for the original author’s intention. Irenaeus realized that they “gather their views from other sources than the Scriptures” while “they endeavor to adapt with an air of probability to their own peculiar assertions the parables of the Lord, the sayings of the prophets and the words of the apostles” (1.8.1) Irenaeus says this ad hoc interpretation (or *eisegesis*) “disregards the order and connection of the Scriptures.” He likens this to taking apart the individual jewels that make up a skilled artist’s beautiful image of a king and rearranging them so as to make them into a dog or a fox (1.8.1).

Cults have always twisted biblical texts in service of their own unbiblical message. We, like Irenaeus, should unmask the artificiality and dishonesty of such literary license when it appears in New Age circles.

Fourth, heresy is not only unbiblical; it is illogical. Irenaeus not only defended orthodoxy as the original and legitimate faith, he also attacked the irrationality of Gnostic theology. In one memorable passage, he lampoons the common Gnostic claim that the ultimate Godhead is absolutely unknowable and unnameable. The apologist finds it odd that the Gnostics speak so much and with such metaphysical gusto about that which, on their own terms, they can neither know anything of nor say anything about! Since the Gnostics assign a wide variety of names to spiritual principles which they take to be unnameable, Irenaeus proposes his own cluster of ultimate spiritual entities consisting of Gourd, Utter-Emptiness, Cucumber, and Melon (1.11.4)!

Irenaeus's satire spotlights the stupidity of making the absolute reality beyond all words or thoughts. If this were so, any name—even the Cosmic Cucumber—would be equally appropriate or inappropriate for God. When modern, neo-Gnostic Joseph Campbell asserts in *The Power of Myth* that “God is beyond names and forms” and even “transcends thingness,” we should remember the rank illogic of such remarks, especially when Campbell later goes on to say all sorts of things about the God who cannot be known!

Fifth, Christology is at the center of *Against Heresies*. Irenaeus knew that the Gnostic distortion of the meaning and work of Jesus Christ was its most dangerous aspect. Gnostics, then as now, divide the man Jesus from “the Christ” in various ways. The Christ is viewed as a spirit that temporarily visited Jesus and left him at the cross. Irenaeus realized that this perversion of Jesus leaves us fast in our fallenness because it denies that Christ died for our sins. Jesus is viewed as an enlightened man visited by the same Christ who elicits our the Christhood in each one of us. To this Irenaeus responds:

The Gospel . . . knew of no other man but Him who was of Mary, who also suffered; and no Christ who flew away from Jesus before the passion; but Him who was born it knows as Jesus Christ the Son of God, and that this same suffered and rose again (3.16.5)

Irenaeus argued that only through the suffering of Jesus the Christ could sinful beings be redeemed, “for . . . it was not possible that the man . . . who had been destroyed through disobedience, could reform himself” (3.18.8).

New Age versions of Jesus repeat this ancient error in similar ways. Jesus is viewed as a man who tapped into a universal Christ Consciousness. He is viewed as an example of what a self-realized master can do. The cross, then, loses all biblical significance. The resurrection, if considered, is spiritualized. It does not vindicate Jesus as the unique Lord and Savior, but provides an example of possible human attainment. The Jesus of biblical revelation must be lifted up in the face of these confusions.

The Gnostic planks of self-deification, biblical distortion, irrationality, and Christological confusion are mirrored in the neo-Gnostic elements of the New Age movement. With an eye toward Irenaeus we can discover principles of confrontation just as applicable today as they were eighteen hundred years ago. Heresies will be with us until the End, but new heresies are hard to find indeed.